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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PROP](#) [KOLY](#) [CH](#)
SUBJECT: OLYMPIC "PROTEST ZONES" -- SECURITY AUTHORITIES'
FEAR OF CRITICISM TRUMPED PUBLIC RELATIONS CONSIDERATIONS

REF: A. BEIJING 2865
[1](#)B. BEIJING 2009
[1](#)C. OSC CPP20080725704002

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Aubrey Carlson
for reasons 1.4 (B/D).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) A lack of coordination between the Beijing Olympics organizing committee and security forces led to the poor implementation of the Olympics "protest zones," according to several Embassy contacts. While academics we spoke with felt the Games improved China's international image overall, the designation of three Beijing parks as protest zones turned into a major public relations misstep when the Beijing Public Security Bureau (PSB) failed to approve even a single demonstration. The Beijing PSB, one contact told us, simply had no incentive to allow even a small protest given the extremely tense security atmosphere surrounding the Games. Another contact speculated that the fatal stabbing of an American tourist coupled with terror attacks in Xinjiang made security officials even more reluctant to risk problems by implementing the protest zone concept. Despite the lack of real protests, the protest zones were reported in China's domestic media, with one major news magazine printing a thinly veiled criticism of the tight controls on free expression. End summary.

Apply at Your Own Risk

[1](#)2. (SBU) Liu Shaowu, head of security for the Beijing Organizing Committee for the Games of the 29th Olympiad (BOCOG), announced to the domestic and international media July 23 that Beijing would designate "demonstration zones" in three city parks, World Park (Fengtai District), Zizhuyuan (or Purple Bamboo) Park (Haidian District) and Ritan (or Temple of the Sun) Park (Chaoyang District) (ref A). PolOffs visited at least one of the three parks during each day of the Olympic Games and never witnessed any protest activity. Discussions with park staff and local security officials revealed that, at best, they had only vague familiarity with the protest zone policy, and none of the parks had made preparations to actually host a demonstration. On August 18, the Xinhua News Agency reported that 77 people, including three foreigners, had applied to the Beijing Public Security Bureau to hold protests. According to Xinhua, 74 would-be demonstrators withdrew their applications after their grievances were "resolved," and no protests were actually approved. At least six Chinese were reportedly detained after applying to use the protest zones, including two elderly women who

were administratively sentenced to one year of reeducation through labor, though authorities later reportedly rescinded this punishment.

Protest Zones Blemish PR Effort

13. (C) Li Xiguang (protect), Executive Dean of Tsinghua University's School of Journalism and Communication, told PolOff August 26 that overall the Olympics represented a remarkable turnaround for China's international image after months of negative press related to Tibet and human rights. Li said an analysis of international news coverage that he conducted in cooperation with colleagues overseas revealed that only 22 percent of the Olympics news stories in the American and the European press were "negative" toward China. Li said the lavish opening ceremony was "money well spent," as the international reaction was overwhelmingly positive. From the point of view of the Chinese Government, Li explained, the fatal attack on American Olympic team-related tourists at Beijing's Drum Tower August 9 was, in addition to being a tragedy, the major public relations crisis of the Olympics. Li agreed, however, that the stillborn "protest zones" actually generated more negative Western press attention than the tragic stabbing. Li took credit for convincing BOCOG to designate the protest zones, noting that he had floated the idea at a May 10 conference attended by high-level State Council Information Office and Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) officials (ref B). However, Li was at a

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loss to explain why the Government did not allow even a single protest.

Lack of Coordination Doomed Protest Zones

14. (C) Most contacts we spoke with expressed belief that a lack of coordination between BOCOG and China's public security apparatus was to blame for the protest zone fiasco. Liu Libin (protect), Deputy Secretary General of Tsinghua University's International Center for Communication Studies, told PolOff that while BOCOG and MFA officials understood the public diplomacy benefits of allowing at least some demonstrations, the Beijing Public Security Bureau (PSB), which was responsible for vetting protest applications, never accepted the idea. As the opening ceremony grew closer, Liu said, and top leaders increasingly emphasized security as the sole criteria for the success of the Games, the Beijing PSB felt the risk of approving even a small, relatively uncontroversial demonstration was too great. From the PSB perspective, Liu said, approving a protest brought "many risks and zero rewards."

Zhou Yongkang Himself Vetoed Protests

15. (C) Yang Ziyun (protect), a senior editor of Zhongguo Gaige ("China Reforms"), the journal of the National Development and Reform Commission, offered a similar analysis to PolOff August 29. Yang characterized the protest zone debacle as a clash between "BOCOG and the State Council" on the one hand and Politburo Standing Committee member Zhou Yongkang, who is in charge of China's domestic security apparatus, on the other. Yang said Zhou vetoed the idea of allowing any protests in the designated zones. Ding Kuisong (protect), the Vice Chairman of the China Reform Forum, speculated that the Drum Tower attack and incidents of violence in Xinjiang boosted the hand of security forces and made them even more reluctant

to implement the protest zone concept.

¶6. (C) Guangming Ribao editor Dong Yuyu (protect) told PolOff that BOCOG agreed to create the protest zones as a show of respect for the International Olympic Committee and to comply with IOC rules. At most, Dong argued, Chinese authorities were prepared to allow foreigners to use the zones. Dong said BOCOG then "spilled the beans" by announcing the establishment of the zones to the domestic and international press. BOCOG's high-profile announcement of the zones was "a mistake," as there was never any intention to allow "real protests" by Chinese to take place.

Praise, then Disappointment in Chinese Press

¶7. (SBU) In general, the domestic press has treated the protest zone story with caution and has rarely ventured beyond Xinhua News Agency copy. The China Youth Daily, the mouthpiece of the Communist Youth League, praised the protest zone idea in a July 24 editorial (ref C), saying the zone offered an opportunity for "democratic training." There is nothing to fear from allowing the expression of "wrong" opinions in the parks, the commentary said, as "erroneous ideas will naturally fail in the battle between points of view." Internet chat room commentary, however, was generally skeptical, with one late-July posting on the Caijing magazine website calling the protest zone plan "a joke" and another predicting authorities would "release the hounds" on any demonstrators that "get out of hand." Since the closing ceremony, the Chinese press has been largely silent on the protest zones with the notable exception of a critical article in the September 1 edition of China Newsweek (Zhongguo Xinwen Zhoukan). The article describes an August 9 incident during which a man reportedly unfurled a banner in Ritan Park that called for a reduction in the gap between rich and poor and expressed support for President Hu Jintao's "scientific development" theory. Though the sign largely mimicked Government slogans, the man was still whisked away by police in a matter of minutes. The China Newsweek piece goes on to describe, with thinly veiled sarcasm, how the "protest parks" were otherwise devoid of demonstrations during the Games.

RANDT